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ABSTRACT

Findings of a study that examined the learning experiences and postsecondary plans of California high school students who were not participating in a college preparatory program are presented in this paper. Methodology involved a survey of 2,600 11th- and 12th-graders who identified themselves as enrolled in either a general or vocational-technical high school program. The students came from a total of 47 comprehensive and continuation high schools and Regional Occupation Centers. The sample was composed of approximately 50 percent White, 33 percent Hispanic, 11 percent Black, and 13 percent other groups. A total of 37 school administrators were also surveyed. Overall, general education students were fairly positive about high school; understood the importance of education for obtaining employment; and had definite postsecondary plans for education, work, and careers. However, current school reform efforts were not reaching general education students, who may have been unprepared for the work force or other postschool options. Boredom was a major complaint. Eight recommendations are included, some of which are to include more work or career preparation information and experiences, applied learning, collaboration, and teamwork; and to provide certification of work-related skills. Five tables are included, and the appendix describes the study methodology. (10 endnotes) (LMI)

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Preliminary Findings from the Study of The Education and Preparation for Work of "General Education" High School Students In California

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Preliminary Findings from the Study of the
Education and Preparation for Work of "General Education"
High School Students in California

Does the nationally heralded crisis of high school students unskilled and unprepared for the work force exist in California? This was a driving question behind a recent California Department of Education (CDE) study focusing on the school learning experiences and postsecondary plans of California high school students who are not in the college preparatory[1] program. It is the first statewide study of its kind done in California.

Since 1983, California has been a leader in the nationwide thrust for public school reform. Initial impact studies of the state's efforts revealed that increased graduation requirements and revised curricula have taken hold in California high schools[2]. Other follow-up reports[3] concentrated on four-year higher education preparation and enrollments which come from about 20 percent of the high school student population[4]. Students not preparing for college were often overlooked.

This study presents a cross-sectional "snapshot" of such "general education" students and of reform impact on what they study in high school. Our target student population was 11th and 12th grade students who identified themselves as either in a "general"[5] or a "vocational-technical"[6] high school program, both of which usually do not prepare students to directly enter a four-year college or university after high school as does the college preparatory program. Almost one-half the 2600 student respondents were white; nearly one-third, Hispanic; 11 percent, black; and 13 percent, "other" (for example, Asian, Pacific Islander, Filipino, American Indian). Close to one-fourth of the students reported usually speaking a language other than English at home: 16 percent, Spanish; the remainder, one of nine less common languages such as Korean, Cambodian, Hmong, Farsi. Students were surveyed in a total of 47 comprehensive high schools[7], continuation high schools[8], and Regional Occupation Centers or Programs (ROC/Ps)[9]. School administrators at 37 of these educational sites also responded to a separate school survey.

Findings and conclusions about the education and preparation for work of general education students follow. Recommendations for addressing the needs and interests of these students are also included. The study findings, conclusions, and recommendations will inform two other major CDE undertakings - the Transition from School to Work Initiative and the High School Task Force Report, especially its Transition to Work subcommittee.

OVERALL FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- **General education students overall are fairly positive about high school and understand the importance of education for obtaining good jobs although only 60 percent have a planned course of high school study.**

- General education students have definite postsecondary plans for education, work, and careers.

- High school courses, programs, and school staff advisement are generally not preparing general education students for their chosen work fields or careers or for the postsecondary education required for these choices.

- The current school reform appears not to be reaching general education students and their high school education.

- General education students may be leaving California public high schools unskilled and unprepared for the workforce and for other post-high school options.

- With two-thirds of general education students reporting being "bored with high school," much remains to be done in these schools to nurture and to serve general education students well.

SPECIFIC FINDINGS AND CONCLUSIONS

- Importance of Education to General Education Students

  - Significance of High School Diploma. Almost all general education students clearly understand the significance of obtaining a high school diploma in order to get a better job. But among these students, more black and Hispanic students than the other ethnic groups notably disagree with the high school diploma-to-better jobs linkage.

  - Planned Course of Study. Nearly 60 percent of general education students have a planned course of study for their high school education, although Hispanic students are least likely to have such plans. School counselors, parents, and students themselves are the most frequently used sources in determining these courses of study. Yet, 40 percent of general education students either do not have a planned course of study or do not know whether they have such a plan. (See Figure 1.)

- General Education Students' Fairly Positive Attitudes Toward High School

  - Attitudes Toward High School. Overall, general education students have fairly positive attitudes toward high school: they feel they are getting a good education at their schools and have interesting courses. Only black students particularly feel they are not getting a good education in high school and that their courses repeat previously learned information. Yet, two-thirds of general education students report being "bored with high school."

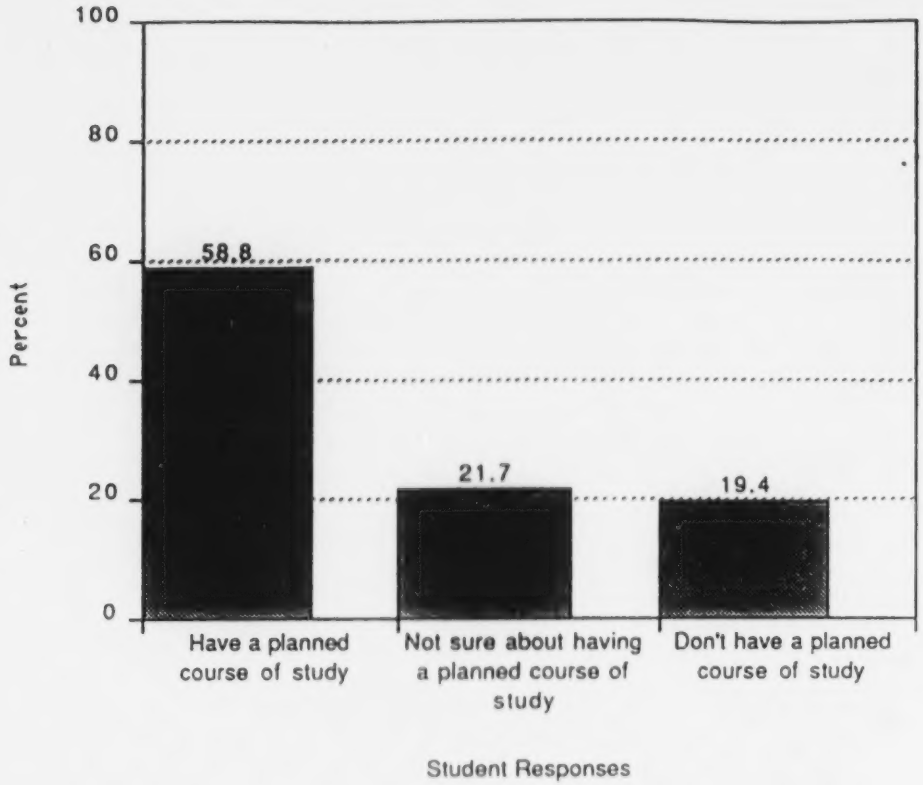

Figure 1. General education student reponses about a planned course of study for high school (N=2594)

However, the achievement motivation of general education students varies: they want good grades; don't take easy courses to get good grades; but, tend not to work hard in school. Slightly more than one-half of these students have a grade point average (GPA) between B- and C and just over 20 percent have GPAs between B and B+. Yet, nearly three-fourths describe themselves as "about average" workers in high school. By contrast, Hispanic students consider themselves "hard workers" but have the lowest GPAs of all the ethnic groups.

- Student Satisfaction with Academic Learning. The majority of general education students currently believe that they have satisfactory opportunities to learn the following transferable generic skills: reading, speaking, listening, writing, math, science, and decision making. By contrast, they perceive a shortage of opportunities to acquire typing and computer skills and "more than enough opportunity" to learn the academic skills of reading, writing, and math. Yet, they feel generally confident about the future usefulness of these academic skills.

- Postsecondary Plans of General Education Students

  - Students' Postsecondary Education Plans. Overwhelmingly general education students plan on some level of postsecondary education in the first two years after high school: 50 percent plan to attend two-year colleges; just over 20 percent plan to attend four-year colleges; and, 13 percent plan to obtain vocational or technical training. More non-black and non-Hispanic minority students (i.e. Asians including Chinese, Japanese, Laotian, and Cambodian; Pacific Islanders; and, Filipinos) than other ethnic groups state their intentions to go to college. Hispanic students are least inclined toward college, often planning vocational or technical training instead. These postsecondary education plans further suggest that general education students understand the importance of education for obtaining good jobs. (See Figure 2.)

  - Students' Work Plans. A solid majority of general education students plan to work in the first two years after high school: over one-third, part time; nearly one-fourth, full time. These students often plan to work while obtaining postsecondary education, particularly minority students. (See Figure 3.)

  - Students' Career Choices. Nearly 75 percent of general education students have chosen a specific type of work, or a career, they want to do after they finish their education. *Parents are overwhelmingly students' main source of career guidance and information*, followed distantly by *academic subject teachers*. Despite students' primary reliance on school counselors to plan a course of high school study, students rely on them far less for career planning. (See Figure 4.)

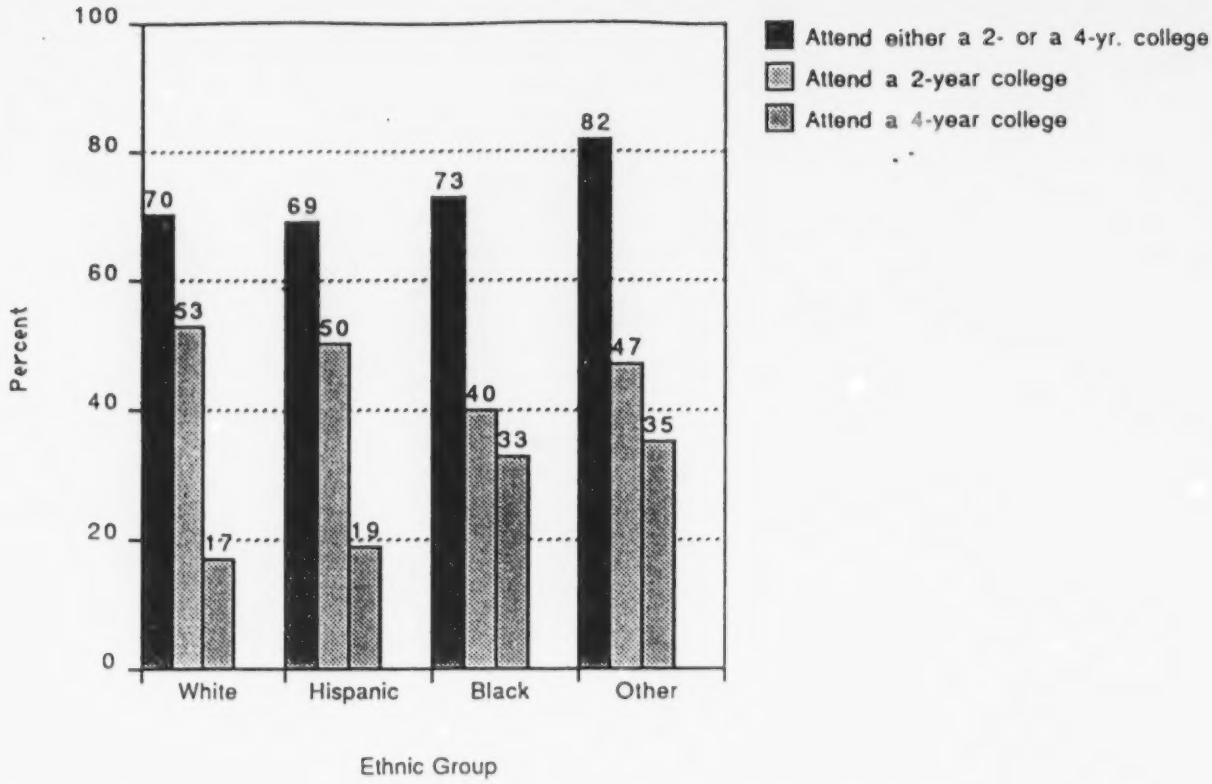

Figure 2. Postsecondary education plans of general education students immediately after high school, by ethnicity (N=2594)

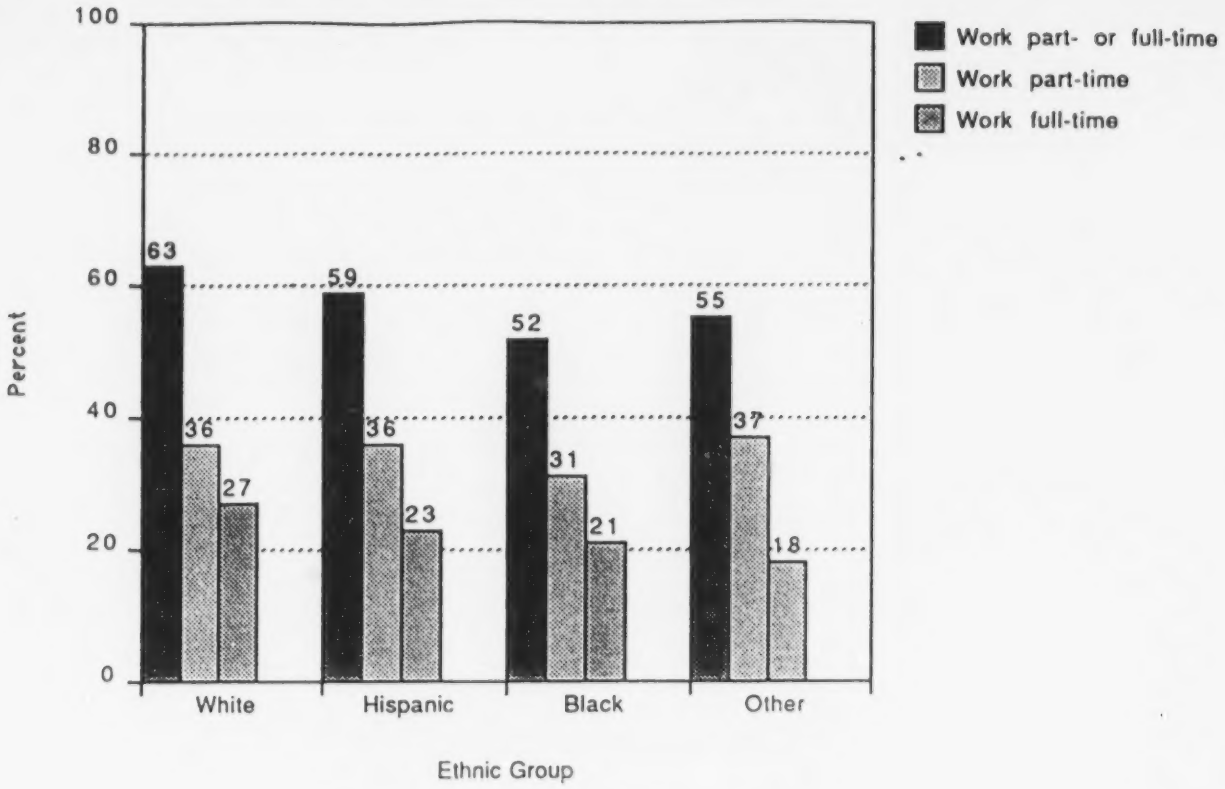

Figure 3. Work plans of general education students immediately after high school, by ethnicity (N=2594)

- **Insufficient preparation of general education students for work or career fields or for necessary postsecondary education**

  - Student Dissatisfaction with Work Preparation Learning. General education students are generally *dissatisfied* with opportunities to learn in the following work preparation areas: job-related or job-specific activities; work or career choice courses; general work skills such as punctuality, appropriate dress, and interpersonal skills; and especially, specific work skills related to their chosen work or career fields. Only 40 percent think getting a job after graduation will be easy.

  - Lack of Relevance of Vocational Education and Work Experience Courses. Of the nearly 60 percent of general education students who completed at least one *vocational education* course, only one-third report it related to their work or career choice. Only one-fourth of students completed at least one *work experience education* course, with over one-fifth of those students indicating that they saw no relationship between their work experience education course and their career choice.

    Based on school staff responses from the 37 education sites, high school vocational education coursework is usually not accepted for high school *academic* graduation requirements. At nearly one-half the sites, school staff indicate that the very few (10 or less) vocational education courses meeting academic graduation requirements are mainly industrial-technology and business courses, most often accepted for math and science requirements.

    Further, vocational education courses are rarely linked to community college curricula creating an "articulated" (or non-repetitive, coordinated) program of specific work or career preparation and training from high school through community college to employment. Only 15 sites report having any articulation agreements with community colleges, and these are usually in automotive technology and in computer technology.

  - Student Uncertainty about Being Prepared for Work. General education students are *uncertain* about whether high school is preparing them for eventual employment in their chosen work or career fields. Overwhelmingly they want *more preparation courses for the work world* and teacher/counselor *encouragement to learn a useful employment skill*.

  - Limited Student Participation in Career Exploration Activities. Administrative staff at almost all 37 educational sites believe that their sites offer career exploration or orientation activities, with one-half reporting mandatory

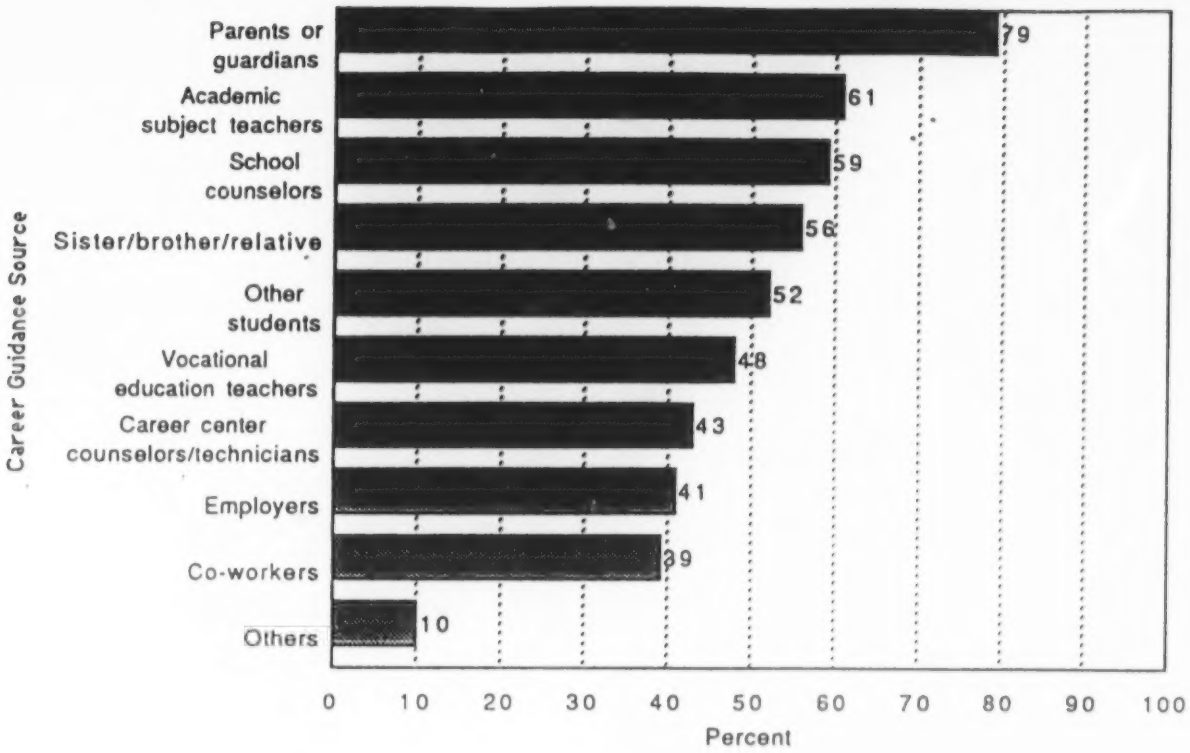

Figure 4. Sources of career guidance for general education students' work/career choices (N=2594)

participation for all students. Although 90 percent of general education students report knowing whether such activities are offered at their schools, less than one-half of these students indicate that they have participated. Just over one-fourth of the participants report having done so voluntarily. As noted earlier, most general education students state that *parents are their primary career information and guidance source* despite the availability of school activities and staff for these purposes.

- Student Lack of Information about the Postsecondary Education Needed for Career Choices. Almost three-fourths of general education students have selected specific careers but *only 13 percent of these students could go straight to work* in their chosen work fields with just a high school education; one-half would have to obtain specialized postsecondary education at a community college or in a trade school; and, nearly 40 percent would have to obtain a four-year college degree to realize their career choices. However, general education students' postsecondary education *plans* tend not to match the postsecondary *requirements* for their chosen careers. Only two-thirds of all the students needing a community college degree or vocational-technical training are planning such preparation. Only about one-third of the group needing a four-year college education is planning on such education after high school. (See Figure 5.)

- High School Programs Inappropriate for the Postsecondary Education Students Need. General education students, especially Hispanic students, tend to be concentrated in "lower level" (not the four-year college preparatory) math and science courses. Only 30 percent of general education students report that they received school staff encouragement to take advanced math, science and English courses appropriate for four-year college eligibility.

- Limited School Reform Impact on General Education Students

  - Availability of and Enrollment in Vocational Education and Work Experience Courses. School staff at over one-half the 37 educational sites report that the number of vocational education courses available at their schools has remained stable or increased over the past five years. The proportion of general education students completing vocational education courses has increased at all sites in the same time period; enrollments in work experience education courses are steady or just slightly increased at most sites. However, as reported earlier, students usually find these courses not relevant to their work or career choices.

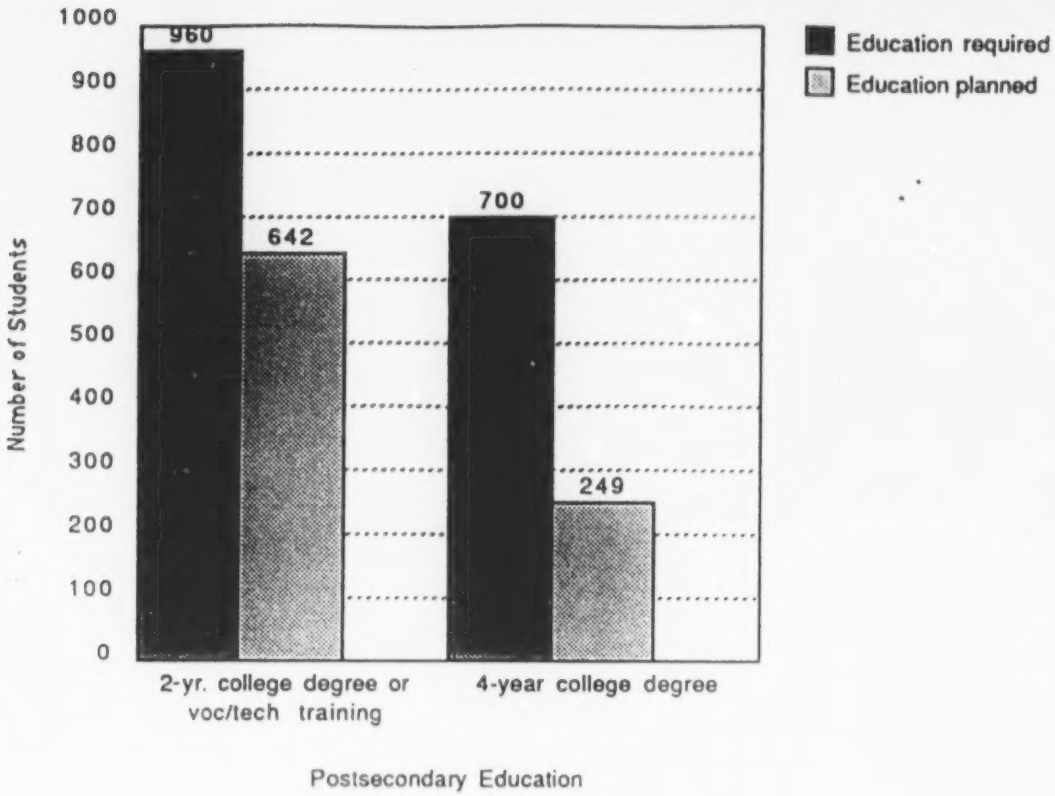

Figure 5. Education planned versus required for students to realize their career choices (N=1660)

Note: Not all students indicated a career choice. Students with career choices requiring a high school education are not included.

- Fewer Writing Assignments for General Education Students. Although nearly all school administrator responses reveal that all students' weekly writing assignments across the curriculum have increased since reform, educational sites tend to place a lesser writing demand on general education students than on the college preparatory group.

- Mixed Homework Impact. The reform effort to intensify student learning through increased out-of-school student time spent on homework assignments appears less successful: almost equal numbers of educational sites report either increased or decreased student homework time.

- "Not on Line" for Graduation. Up to 25 percent of general education students in comprehensive high schools and ROC/Ps, and as high as 80 percent of general education continuation high school students, are not "on-line" for graduation with their grade level peers. School staff report insufficient credits to meet revised high school graduation requirements and poor school attendance as the primary reasons for these students' not proceeding on schedule to graduation.

Recommendations

These findings and conclusions suggest that

- general education students may be leaving California public high schools unskilled and unprepared for the workforce or for other post-high school options, and

- much remains to be done in these schools to nurture and to serve general education students well.

Action on both counts is particularly important for at least two reasons. First, general education students throughout the 1980s (and most likely for the 1990s as well) comprised the bulk of high school students who do not go on to four-year colleges or universities (between 70 and 80%)[10]. Most of this bulk go straight to work after high school or obtain community college preparation for the work world. Attention to their needs is also important to fully implement the current school reform effort begun seven years ago with SB 813, the Hughes-Hart Educational Reform Act, with the State Board of Education's model graduation requirements, and with CDE's subject area curriculum frameworks. Reform aims to provide students with a quality high school education for realizing their postsecondary plans.

In this context, the following recommendations are offered to secondary schools.

1. Include *more work or career preparation* information and experiences, particularly geared to the workplace requirements of the 21st century, in all courses and in counseling and support services and by organizing courses into major career clusters.

2. Emphasize *applied learning* in all classes, so that students can use academic skills in work-related contexts *to understand how schoolwork relates to their work or career plans.*

3. *Collaborate and cooperate with ROC/Ps and community colleges* to incorporate applied learning into all courses and to develop or to expand articulated programs in various major career fields.

4. *Eliminate program "tracks" and* the resulting, largely inflexible, *split between college preparatory and general education courses.* Students need *flexibility to move among courses* to meet academic graduation requirements and to get the preparation needed for postsecondary plans.

5. Ensure that *vocational education courses meet academic high school graduation requirements and qualify students for admission to* two-year and four-year *colleges or for direct employment.*

6. Provide students with *certification of* demonstrated *academic and work-related skills and competencies* learned in high school for use in obtaining jobs or postsecondary education. Such certifications should be *geared to* specified *academic and workplace standards* and should be *available continuously through high school.*

7. Prior to participation in high school career-preparation courses, students need to receive *initial information and assistance about both educational and career planning by eighth grade*, and no later than ninth grade. Such help should *continue throughout high school* to ensure students' postsecondary aspirations and their high school preparation match.

8. Use the following *teamwork approaches* to revise students' high school learning experiences and to provide student support and help.

   - Secondary school *administrators, teachers, and counselors must value* the effective education, preparation, counseling, and postsecondary accomplishments of *all students*, not just of the college preparatory group.

   - *Academic* subject teachers, *vocational-technical teachers, and school administrators need to* work together to develop and to implement work/career preparation-oriented courses and curricula.

   - Because of the strong parental influence of parents on general education students' work or career choices, *secondary school staff needs to work with students' parents* for effective joint guidance of students through high school and onto their postsecondary plans.

   - *Secondary schools need to obtain continuous guidance and cooperation from the work world* for preparing students with

necessary academic and technical skills for employment and for informing academic and vocational teachers, school counselors, and parents about such skills and future employment opportunities.

Appendix

Study Procedures

In Spring 1990, a 60-site stratified sample of 30 comprehensive and 20 continuation high schools and of 10 Regional Occupational Centers or Programs (ROC/Ps) were sent survey instruments. The sample was geographically distributed; balanced among urban, suburban, and rural sites; ranged from small (35 students) to large (3520 students) sites; and, was weighted toward sites with 60 percent or greater combined black and Hispanic enrollments because these students groups are overrepresented in the general education high school population.

The survey instruments included a 25-item Student Survey and a 7-item School Data Form, both of which had been field-tested. A school administrator at each of 37 sites (62% of 60 sampled) completed and returned the School Data Form. Comprehensive and continuation high school students answered the Student Surveys in high school general English, remedial (or "make-up-credits") English, and vocational or general mathematics classes. ROC/P students completed their surveys in administrator-chosen classes appropriate to reach the target general education population. Nearly 2600 usable Student Surveys were returned from 47 of 60 school sites (78%).

Notes

[1]"College preparatory" students take academic courses required to graduate from high school and to directly enter a four-year institution of higher education (IHE) (i.e. completing the number and distribution of high school courses to meet University of California or California State University admissions eligibility).

[2]See *Study of the Implementation of the Model Curriculum Standards in California High Schools;* Catherine A. George; California Department of Education, 1987 and *State Education Reform Can Improve Secondary Schools;* Allan R. Odden and David D. Marsh; Policy Analysis for California Education (PACE), University of California, Berkeley, 1987.

[3]See *Eligibility of California's 1986 High School Graduates for Admission to Its Public Universities,* Report No. 88-10; California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1988 and *California College-Going Rates, 1987 Update;* California Postsecondary Education Commission, 1988.

[4]The percentages of college preparatory and general education secondary school students during the 1980s were estimated from data about the college-going rates of California high school graduates to four-year California public colleges and universities from Fall 1980 to Fall 1989 contained in Student Profiles 1990 of the California Postsecondary Education Commission (CPEC). Two provisos apply to the estimated percentages. The CPEC data include public and private high school graduates. However, public school graduates constitute 90 percent (or more) of the graduates from year to year according to CPEC analysts. The data also only refer to high school graduates going to public four-year IHEs in California, thereby excluding private IHE enrollments of graduates in-state and out-of-state. However, despite the preceding factors, this author believes that the CPEC data still provide the most useful, current, and complete data available for estimating proportions of college and general education students in California public high schools.

[5]"General" high school program students take required academic courses to graduate without a special focus on college preparation or on vocational education.

[6]"Vocational-technical" high school program students take required academic courses to graduate plus courses to prepare for a specific job or job field directly after high school or after going to a community college or to a trade or vocational school in the same field.

[7]Comprehensive high schools provide an all-inclusive curriculum of academic subjects (e.g., math, science, English, foreign languages) and of electives (e.g., music, art, vocational education) for all students to meet state high school graduation requirements. Course offerings to meet the University of California and the California State University admissions eligibility requirements are also available. Support services (e.g., college and career counseling, libraries) and extracurricular activities (e.g., clubs, sports) expand upon and complement the curriculum.

[8]Continuation high schools, available since 1919, offer a diploma program for

students whose needs are not being met in comprehensive high schools. The broad based curriculum includes personalized instruction; offers intensive guidance services; and, emphasizes occupational orientation or a work-study schedule.

[9]ROC/Ps provide high school students, out-of-school youth, and adults entry-level job training and employment preparation.

[10]See note 4.